

RAS-AL-KHAIMAH

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we all were sensible that behind the smiling mask lay a mind as keen and poised as the blade of his ceremonial sword. 622

When we left the palace, the sun was blazing from a cloudless sky and the creek shone like a mirror. We returned to the Khan Sahib's house to pack some refreshments, and then mounted the six camels which he had procured for us and began the eight-mile ride to his summer residence at the foot of the mountains. Although a comparatively short distance, the journey was a tiring one. Apart from a few scattered palm trees, there was no shade, and the sun, being in the meridian, was at its fiercest and beat down upon us mercilessly. The humidity was extremely trying, also: Frew thought it must have been about 80°. The perspiration streamed off our faces and seeped through our shirts. Our camels, also affected by the heat, lumbered along in leisurely fashion, which was not so uncomfortable as when they cantered. We passed several large date plantations, as shady and inviting as an English wood, and noisy with the cries of jays and parakeets. Brilliant-hued butterflies darted among the palm fronds, some of them measuring six inches across the wings. 000

Crossing a dried-up water course, or *wadhi*, we reached the foot of the hills. Of buff and pink sandstone, they sloped gradually for 300 feet, and were easily climbable for that distance. At that point they gave way to sheer cliffs of black and brown igneous rock, formidable with giant buttresses and massive boulders. Occasionally we glimpsed passes and crevices along the slopes which were honeycombed with caves. In these, the Khan Sahib informed us, the Shi'hou tribes lived. About 2,000 feet up, there were plateaux in the mountains, with small valleys where the tribesmen cultivated corn and sugar canes. We saw nothing of the Shi'hou, however, and after an hour's ride entered a low-lying valley through an avenue of tall neem trees. 563
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There were about twenty houses on this summer estate. Each was a two-storied coral and plaster dwelling, with an open veranda running round the top floor. A low mud wall and a wicket gate divided the properties, each of which had its guard of sleepy-looking Arabs armed with rifles. We dismounted in front of the gateway, leaving our camels in charge of the guard. In contrast to the surrounding desert, the garden was like an illustration from the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*. White and crimson roses flourished in pots on either side of the path, whilst masses of red and purple bougainvillea trailed over the veranda. There was even a small 529
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THE SAND KINGS OF OMAN

247 patch of lawn, kept green and fresh by a little fountain, which derived its water supply from a stream running at the foot of the hills. The air was full of the fragrance of flowers, and bees and butterflies were busily gorging themselves on nectar.

000 After a wash, we sat on the terrace, enjoying the panorama of desert and mountain range which stretched before us until it melted in a violet haze. Lunch was served in one of the ground floor rooms and consisted of cold chicken and rice which we had brought with us. The Khan Sahib, who was an admirable host, produced Turkish cigarettes and, over coffee, informed us that it would be as well if we set back for Sharjah by three o'clock. The vehicles were now in good running order and, as there would be a full moon, we should be able to get back to the Fort by ten o'clock that night.

I was resting in an easy chair on the veranda, enjoying an after-lunch pipe, when Stanton, the radio officer, came up to me and suggested that we should take a walk in the hills. Feeling cool and refreshed at the time, I foolishly agreed with his suggestion, stipulating that we should not go far and that we must return within an hour. Taking our helmets and a revolver each, we set off at a smart pace through the valley and were soon scaling the steep sides of a ravine. I suddenly remembered that we should have informed the others of our departure, but Stanton reassured me by stating that we should soon be back.

Although the sun was uncomfortably hot, the climb was quite an easy one, and there were occasional niches and caves in the rocks where one could rest. It did not take us long to reach the top of the slope, and we stood on a flat slab of sandstone to admire the view. Even from 300 feet we could see the slopes of Jebel-al Fayhia, the red sandstone peak which is used as a landmark by passing aircraft. The date plantations and the gardens looked like small allotments from that height, whilst beyond the desert spread out like a khaki blanket. Above us towered the high peaks of Ruus-al-Jebel, curiously carved and castellated by a million years of rain and wind. Parts of the mountain were impassable, their volcanic boulders being sufficiently steep to daunt the most skilled mountaineer. To our right, however, there was a crack in the rocks about five feet wide, culminating in a series of crude steps surmounted by a wide sill. Stanton, who wished to take a photograph of the panorama, suggested that we should climb to this ledge. It appeared to be only a few minutes' climb, so I assented.

From the top of the ledge we obtained a much better view of